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AUTHOR Mortensen, Peter
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ABSTRACT

When writing is taught through conferences between a student and teacher, the authority of the teacher profoundly influences what students think and say about writing. Also, as students learn to deal with their teacher's authority, they develop strategies for talking about writing tasks in voices that are authentically their own. An examination of a particular conference between student and teacher revealed their negotiation of authority. Specifically, the teacher suspected that the student had formulated a thesis that he did not believe, but one that he thought might be politically appealing to the teacher. Before the student ventured a thesis true to his own political stance, the teacher refused to disclose how he expected the student to revise the paper, focusing on the content of the paper rather than the argument structure. Once the thesis changed, the teacher allowed the student to consider the form his argument should take in writing. The teacher, in effect, granted authority for the student to express his own opinion, thus allowing him to learn to distinguish between the authority he can possess over what he says in and about writing and the authority over strategies of argument that he must surrender to the teacher. Through this kind of examination of authority in writing conferences, an understanding can be gained about social influences on the writing process. Such knowledge is crucial if teachers are to construct models of writing processes that describe not only the production of individual, autonomous texts, but also account for the cultural forces that constitute those texts. (A partial transcript of the writing conference and a linguistic analysis of it are appended. Fourteen references also are included.) (SRT)

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Analyzing Conference Conversation: A Writer Learns to Talk about Writing

Peter Mortensen
Department of Literature
University of California, San Diego

I'd like to make two points in my talk this morning:

First, that when writing is taught by conferencing, the authority of even the most passive instructor profoundly influences what students think and say about writing.

And second, that as students learn to negotiate their instructors' authority, they can develop important strategies for talking about writing tasks in voices authentically their own.

It's sometimes hard to see how authority shapes the events of writing conferences, especially if--as the current literature suggests--teachers attempt to act as collaborators or coaches rather than evaluators or dictators. But whether we recognize the influence of authority or not, it is ever present. The close analysis of conference conversation I'll share with you today bears out this thesis.

In a moment I'll play excerpts from a short writing conference, excerpts that demonstrate a student in the early stages of learning to speak from an authoritative position about his writing. While the tape I've brought is from only one conference, the pattern of student-instructor interaction I'll be describing is evident in all of some thirty writing conferences

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I've taped and audited over the last year.

Let me give you a little background about the student, his instructor, and their conference. The student, David, is a first-year undergraduate with an undeclared major. The instructor, Evan, is a doctoral candidate in sociology with three years' experience teaching college writing. The conference we'll hear was David's second meeting with Evan during his first quarter in his college's required analytical writing sequence. This conference reveals the behavior of a student yet unfamiliar with the "rules" of a collaborative writing conference--rules that often run counter to those that, as Arthur Applebee (1981) tells us, inform the typical high school English class. Please bear in mind that my presentation is about the learning the goes on in this conference; I don't mean to evaluate whether David is a good student or Evan a good instructor.

I'll start my analysis by playing a segment from the beginning of the conference. David has come to Evan with a written plan for a paper analyzing the diction of Ronald Reagan's first inaugural address. He proposes this thesis:

> Reagan is able to effectively project his purpose through language, in which specified words are chosen to <u>deceive</u> the audience.

Just listen now to get a sense of what's happening in the conference. If you want to follow the dialogue, it's printed on the first page of the handout. I'll replay each chunk of dialogue before I talk about it. [Play tape: extended segment.] (I can give you a complete transcript of this conference if you

want one.)

My method of analyzing David's and Evan's conversation deserves some explanation before I go on. It's adapted from Labov and Fanshel's (1977) work on the talk that psychotherapists have with their clients, a kind of talk that resembles what writing teachers and students often say to one another. (You can find more thorough accounts of this kind of discourse analysis in the sources I've listed at the end of the handout.) For today's presentation, I've altered some of Labov and Fanshel's terminology and somewhat simplified their method. But I've preserved the method's essential feature: I'll look very closely--turn by turn--at two separate episodes in the conference so as to accent the influence of Evan's authority on David's behavior.

Please now turn to the second page of the handout as I walk you through the close analysis of one utterance. Under the heading "TEXT" you'll find the utterance transcribed. Next to it, under the heading "CUES," I've noted details of speech intonation and rhythm. Under the heading "ELABORATED TEXT" I explain, in the appropriate speaker's voice, what's <u>being said</u>. In generating the elaborated text, I draw--just as David and Evan do--on knowledge of what's been said so far in the conversation, as well as on knowledge of the world and the rules that govern social interaction in it. Finally, under the heading "CUMULATIVE EFFECT," I discuss what's <u>being done</u> by what's been said up to and including this point in the conference. (Please ignore the bracketed labels embedded in the analysis text. They refer to

details that will interest people familiar with this method, but aren't essential to understanding the analysis.)

To be sure, the "ELABORATED TEXT" and "CUMULATIVE EFFECT" sections of the analysis represent my interpretation of events in this conversation. But I hold that I've interpreted David's and Evan's interaction within many of the same contexts constraining their own interpretations of the evolving dialogue. Supporting this contention, David and Evan have confirmed that my analysis reasonably accounts for their behavior in the conversation. I sought further to validate my findings by having twelve of Evan's teaching colleagues interpret the episodes of the conversation I'm presenting today. Eleven of the twelve produced readings of the conversational text similar to my own. Be assured, then, that the findings I'm sharing are both reasonable and replicable.

Now looking again at the second page of the handout, follow along as I analyze each turn of the dialogue beginning at 1.0.

[Play tape: 1.0. Evan: "Why, I mean I don't understand why it has to be deceiving. Or do you really think he's being deceiving?"] Here's the elaborated text in Evan's voice:

> I'm not convinced that you believe {DECEPTIVE} that the president deceived his constituents because you've always supported Reagan in class discussion. You may have chosen this {DECEPTIVE} thesis because it appeals to my liberal political sensibilities. But since I am <CRITERIA> not evaluating you based on the political beliefs you express, you needn't adopt my well known political stance in this paper. Thus, I'm giving you

an opportunity to abandon your current thesis {~DECEPTIVE} for a more authentic one.

And here's the cumulative effect of Evan's turn:

Evan has so far been unsuccessful in his <COLLABORATIVE> attempts to persuade David to talk freely about his use of {DECEPTIVE} the word "deceptive." Evan indirectly [DIRECTIVE/ASK] asks for an explanation, but without waiting for a response, he poses a direct [DIRECTIVE/REQUEST] question about the concept of deception. This quick follow-up gives the impression that Evan would prefer that David ignore the initial query and answer the subsequent question. In privileging the question, Evan stresses his desire for David to examine his motives for using {DECEPTIVE} the word "deceptive."

David responds by equivocating. You can follow this on page three of the handout. [Play tape: 1.1. David: "Well I mean..... It's not deceptive, but if.....you know, it seems that looking back over four years, in rereading the address, that it seems that it is deceptive in ways, you know."] Here's the elaborated text:

I believe that {~DECEPTIVE} Reagan has not really deceived his constituents, in that {PROMISE} not fulfilling a campaign promise is not deception but merely a political necessity to accomplish what is best for the electorate. But not having heard you give an alternative interpretation, I am <?PERFORM> undecided

about how to represent my beliefs in this paper. I know, though, that I must venture some response about revising my paper if I am to <CRITERIA> meet the criteria for earning a desirable grade in this course.

And here's the cumulative effect of David's utterance:

David remains unsure of how to express himself in this unfamiliar <COLLABORATIVE> collaborative situation. He assumes that Evan will <~COLLABORATIVE> tell him what is wrong with his writing so he can correct it. Knowing that Evan will <CRITERIA> eventually issue a grade for his work unsettles David because he is unable to discern <?PERFORM> whether he should (or how he can) appeal to <LIBERAL> Evan's politics in his paper. He thus vacillates between [CONSTATIVE/CONCEDE] conceding that his thesis is inaccurate and [CONSTATIVE/ASCRIBE] ascribing qualities to the speech consistent with his thesis.

It's clear that David doesn't know what to make of this situation. He is left confused by Evan's refusal to accept his appeal to authority. Evan's response now exacerbates this confusion. [Play tape: 1.2. Evan: "All right, in what ways is it deceptive?"] Here's the elaborated text:

You are apparently unaware that <FREEDOM> you may speak your mind here and {~DECEPTIVE} abandon the term "deceptive," as it reflects my beliefs <LIBERAL> and not your own <~LIBERAL>. Because <COLLABORATIVE> I want you to discover for yourself a way out of this

confusion, I'll ask you again just how you construe the president's speech to be deceptive. Then, possibly, you will realize that it would <PERFORM> please me if you would write that the president has not deceived his constituents if that is what you actually believe. If this is true, you should choose a thesis that you can support with <CRITERIA> evidence from Reagan's address.

And here's the cumulative effect of Evan's utterance:

Evan recognizes that David does not know <COLLABORATIVE> the general rules that govern writing conferences like this one. But rather than explicitly give the rules to David, Evan opts to demonstrate them. He prompts David to explain why David believes Reagan was "deceptive" in an attempt to expose David's own deception--a first step toward assuring David that <FREEDOM> he can express his political views without fear of penalty when <CRITERIA> Evan evaluates his writing. Evan assumes a more aggressive, authoritative stance here, [DIRECTIVE/REQUEST] requesting that David supply evidence from the speech to support his thesis. In so doing, Evan [CONSTATIVE/INFORM] reveals <CRITERIA> one way he measures the quality of writing--that is, by assessing whether the evidence behind a thesis is adequate.

Evan's tactic works. David is unable to explain his use of the term deceptive. [Play tape: 1.3. David: "Well....."] Here's the elaborated text:

> I can't provide evidence to support my thesis because I don't know <CRITERIA> what kind of evidence you're looking for. I will say nothing more in an attempt to <DISCLOSE> prompt you to say more about what you want me to write.

And here's the cumulative effect of David's utterance:

> David remains reluctant to accept Evan's <COLLABORATIVE> rules for conferencing because he does not know what they entail. Evan must therefore <CRITERIA> more explicitly express the nature of these rules before David can indicate his willingness to <PERFORM> comply with them. David does not know that Evan wants him to <FREEDOM> speak freely, or else he would probably have something to say. David's strategy here is to [DIRECTIVE/REQUEST] indirectly request more information from Evan before contributing further to the conversation.

The conversation continues for a few more minutes with Evan asking questions about specific promises that Reagan might not have fulfilled. David finally proposes that Reagan was attempting to "offend the least number of people," not deceive them. When Evan replies that this is a better approach than "using words like deception," David interrupts to ask if the word "deception" is "a little strong?" Let's look at Evan's response to David's discovery.

[Play tape: 2.0. Evan: "Yeah, I think so. It makes it sound really, really evil. And, uh, uh, you might want to say

it, but you don't ha-, but don't feel like you have to, uh. That is more of a political kind of a th-, a choice. Right?"] Here's the elaborated text:

> Now that I have convinced you to speak with what I perceive to be an authentic voice, I will tell you that if this were my paper, I might be inclined to {DECEPTIVE} apply the term "deception" to describe the president's actions. But I believe that such a choice is politically motivated, and <~CRITERIA> shouldn't be a consideration for successfully completing this assignment. Therefore, honoring <FREEDOM> the rules of free political expression in the academic environment, I want you to know that your grade won't suffer if you say that {~DECEPTIVE} the president's address was <u>not</u> deceptive. Do you now understand <CRITERIA> this rule of our rhetorical situation?

And here's the cumulative effect:

> After making certain that David has {~DECEPTIVE} rejected the notion that the president deceived his constituents, Evan invokes <FREEDOM> his right to [CONSTATIVE/ASSERT] assert that he actually believes the president <u>was</u> being deceptive in his inaugural address. But, to assure that David won't change his mind again, Evan also [CONSTATIVE/ASSERT] asserts <CRITERIA> that both readings {DECEPTIVE}/{~DECEPTIVE} are possible because the political stance one brings to a text does not predetermine the validity or quality of

> one's analysis of that text. And, realizing that David did not understand <COLLABORATIVE> the rules of the conference, Evan begins to [CONSTATIVE/INFORM] reveal them, finally [DIRECTIVE/ASK] asking David if he has followed this transition in their conversation.

David and Evan spend the remainder of their conference discussing evidence from the speech that supports David's new thesis, which reads:

> Reagan is able to effectively project his purpose through language, in which specified words are chosen to convince the audience.

The moment in conference when David formulates this new thesis marks a turning point in the way David relates to Evan's authority. But it's a turning point that isn't all that obvious, so let me recapitulate the analysis so you can see this transition more clearly. Before David ventured a thesis true to his own political stance, Evan refused to disclose how he expected David to revise the plan for his paper. Evan instead focused the conversation on the problem of what to say in the paper rather than how to say it. After David suggested that Reagan merely meant his speech to be convincing--and only after that moment--did Evan allow David to consider the form his argument should take in writing.

Notice that Evan grants David whatever authority he appears to have in this conference. True, David makes moves to prepare himself for taking on authority--for taking responsibility for the thesis of his paper. But it's Evan who ultimately confers

upon David the license to that authority. The institutionalized roles David and Evan play in conference assure a lopsided distribution of power like this. Indeed, I'd like to suggest that any instructor in Evan's position, and any student in David's, would be constrained by similar roles and rules. This inequality isn't necessarily undesirable, though. The transfer of authority from Evan to David in part constitutes, in part enables the learning that David does in this conference. What makes the inequality tolerable, and in fact desirable, is that David is learning to distinguish between the authority he can possess over what he says in and about writing and the authority over strategies of argument that he must surrender to Evan. That David begins to acknowledge this arrangement of authority indicates that he is beginning to understand how, abstractly, the academic discourse community functions, and how, more concretely, one goes about being a member of that community.

Of course we can use this kind of analysis as a tool to improve teaching; we can certainly listen to how students and instructors interact to get a sense of how to conduct writing conferences with greater efficacy. Jacobs and Karliner (1977), Reigstad (1980), and more recently Clark (1985) and Harris (1986) do this quite well.

But I'm not in this study trying to advise how we might improve writing conferences, nor am I even attempting to promote the teaching of writing by conferencing. Instead, by closely analyzing David's and Evan's conference, I have begun to describe social interaction that is itself a process of writing. That is

to say the oral discourse we've heard today is itself a text which, arguably, has the potential to influence the written discourse David subsequently creates. Matters of authority in talk about writing, then, become rather directly matters of authority in writing--a process of translation I feel I've just begun to discuss in the last twenty minutes.

I believe that as we develop a better understanding of how students like David negotiate their instructors' authority, we'll begin to know more about how social interaction figures into writing processes. We urgently need this kind of knowledge, I think, if we are to construct models of writing processes that describe not only the production of individual, autonomous texts, but also account for the cultural forces that shape--indeed, that constitute--those texts.

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Analyzing Conference Conversation:
A Writer Learns to Talk about Writing

Peter Mortensen
Department of Literature, C-005
University of California, San Diego
La Jolla, CA 92093

A. Partial Transcript of Conference

David: And what I did through the main three paragraphs is, uh, just break down the address into three parts. One is the introduction, and the second part is, uh, [tongue click] what he plans to do, and how he's going to do it. And the third one, uh, basically, is just convincing the American people these policies are, are right, and that, that they will work.

Evan: Okay.

David: And he does that through, uh, patriotic images and all that. And the conclusion just, uh, sums up.....the address in saying that how he uses sometimes deceptive language to, uh, convince the people, but this is necessary since he is a politician.

Evan: [Laughs.]

David: And, and, uh, he has to get out of, you know, he's going to convince people, you know he has to--

Evan: Why, I mean I don't understand why it has to be deceiving. Or do you really think he's being deceptive?

David: [Interrupts.] Well I mean..... It's not deceptive, but if.....you know, it seems that looking back after four years, in rereading the address, that it seems that it is deceptive in ways, you know.

Evan: All right, in what ways is it deceptive?

David: Well.....

B. Analysis

1.0	TEXT	CUES
	Evan: Why, I mean I don't understand why it has to be deceiving. Or do you really think he's being deceptive?	Rising intonation of "Why..."

ELABORATED TEXT

Evan: I'm not convinced that you believe {DECEPTIVE} that the president deceived his constituents because you've always supported Reagan in class discussion. You may have chosen this {DECEPTIVE} thesis because it appeals to my liberal political sensibilities. But since I am <CRITERIA> not evaluating you based on the political beliefs you express, you needn't adopt my well known political stance in this paper. Thus, I'm giving you an opportunity to abandon your current thesis {~DECEPTIVE} for a more authentic one.

CUMULATIVE EFFECT

Evan has so far been unsuccessful in his <COLLABORATIVE> attempts to persuade David to talk freely about his use of {DECEPTIVE} the word "deceptive." Evan indirectly [DIRECTIVE/ASK] asks for an explanation, but without waiting for a response, he poses a direct [DIRECTIVE/REQUEST] question about the concept of deception. This quick follow-up gives the impression that Evan would prefer that David ignore the initial query and answer the subsequent question. In privileging the question, Evan stresses his desire for David to examine his motives for using {DECEPTIVE} the word "deceptive."

Key to notation

.....	Pause (each "." represents one-half second)
{PROPOSITION}	Explicit proposition
<PROPOSITION>	Implicit proposition
{?PROP}, <?PROP>	Proposition in question
{~PROP}, <~PROP>	Proposition negated
[SPEECH ACT]	Speech act

1.1	TEXT	CUES
	David: Well I mean.....it's not deceptive, but if.....you know, it seems that looking back after four years, in rereading the address, that it seems that it is deceptive in ways, you know.	Interruption: begins to clarify before Evan finishes; David holds back and allows Evan to finish.

ELABORATED TEXT

David: I believe that {~DECEPTIVE} Reagan has not really deceived his constituents, in that {PROMISES} *not* fulfilling a campaign promise is *not* deception but merely a political necessity to accomplish what is best for the electorate. But not having heard you give an alternative interpretation, I am <?PERFORM> undecided about how to represent my beliefs in this paper. I know, though, that I must venture some response about revising my paper if I am to <CRITERIA> meet the criteria for earning a desireable grade in this course.

CUMULATIVE EFFECT

David remains unsure of how to express himself in this unfamiliar <COLLABORATIVE> collaborative situation. He assumes that Evan will <~COLLABORATIVE> tell him what is wrong with his writing so he can correct it. Knowing that Evan will <CRITERIA> eventually issue a grade for his work unsettles David because he is unable to discern {?PERFORM} whether he should--or how he can--appeal to {LIBERAL} Evan's politics in his paper. He thus vacillates between [CONSTATIVE/CONCEDE] conceding that his thesis is inaccurate and [CONSTATIVE/ASCRIBE] ascribing qualities to the speech consistent with his thesis.

1.2	TEXT	CUES
	Evan: All right, in what ways is it deceptive?	Immediate response in a slightly exasperated tone.

ELABORATED TEXT

Evan: You are apparently unaware that <FREEDOM> you may speak your mind here and {~DECEPTIVE} abandon the term "deceptive," as it reflects my beliefs {LIBERAL} and not your own {~LIBERAL}. Because <COLLABORATIVE> I want you to discover for yourself a way out of this confusion, I'll ask you again just how you construe the president's speech to be deceptive. Then, possibly, you will realize that it would <PERFORM> please me if you would write that the president has not deceived his constituents if that is what you actually believe. If this is true, you should choose a thesis that you can support with <CRITERIA> evidence from Reagan's address.

CUMULATIVE EFFECT

Evan recognizes that David does not know <COLLABORATIVE> the general rules that govern writing conferences. But rather than explicitly give the rules to David, Evan opts to demonstrate them. He prompts David to explain why David believes Reagan was "deceptive" in an attempt to expose David's own deception--a first step toward assuring David that <FREEDOM> he can express his political views without fear of penalty when <CRITERIA> Evan evaluates his writing. Evan assumes a more aggressive, authoritative stance here, [DIRECTIVE/REQUEST] requesting that David supply evidence from the speech to support his thesis. In so doing, Evan [CONSTATIVE/INFORM] reveals <CRITERIA> one way he measures the quality of writing--that is, by assessing whether the evidence behind a thesis is adequate.

1.3	TEXT	CUES
	David: Well.....	Hesitation: 10 second pause before Evan prompts David to continue. Evan shuffles paper.

ELABORATED TEXT

David: I can't provide evidence to support my thesis because I don't know <CRITERIA> what kind of evidence you're looking for. I will say nothing more in an attempt to <DISCLOSE> prompt you to say more about what you want me to write.

CUMULATIVE EFFECT

David remains reluctant to accept Evan's <COLLABORATIVE> rules for conferencing because he does not know what they entail. Evan must therefore <CRITERIA> more explicitly express the nature of these rules before David can indicate his willingness to <PERFORM> comply with them. David does not know that Evan wants him to <FREEDOM> speak freely, or else he would probably have something to say. David's strategy here is to [DIRECTIVE/REQUEST] indirectly request more information from Evan before contributing further to the conversation.

2.0	TEXT	CUES
	Evan: Yeah, I think so. It makes it sound really, really evil. And, uh, uh, you might want to say it, but you don't ha-, but don't feel like you have to, uh. That's more of a political kind of a th-, a choice. Right?	Hesitation: stuttering during utterance that partially mitigates the proposition Evan has persuaded David to accept.

ELABORATED TEXT

Evan: Now that I have convinced you to speak with what I perceive to be an authentic voice, I will tell you that if this were my paper, I might be inclined to {DECEPTIVE} apply the term "deception" to describe the president's actions. But I believe that such a choice is politically motivated, and <~CRITERIA> shouldn't be a consideration for successfully completing this assignment. Therefore, honoring <FREEDOM> the rules of free political expression in the academic environment, I want you to know that your grade won't suffer if you say that {~DECEPTIVE} the president's address was *not* deceptive. Do you now understand <CRITERIA> this rule of our rhetorical situation?

CUMULATIVE EFFECT

After making certain that David has {~DECEPTIVE} rejected the notion that the president deceived his constituents, Evan invokes <FREEDOM> his right to [CONSTATIVE/ASSERT] assert that he actually believes the president *was* being deceptive in his inaugural address. But, to assure that David won't change his mind again, Evan also [CONSTATIVE/ASSERT] asserts <CRITERIA> that both readings {DECEPTIVE}/{~DECEPTIVE} are possible because the political stance one brings to a text does not predetermine the validity or quality of one's analysis of that text. And, realizing that David did not understand <COLLABORATIVE> the rules of the conference, Evan begins to [CONSTATIVE/INFORM] reveal them, finally [DIRECTIVE/ASK] asking David if he has followed this transition in their conversation.

C. Propositions

<COLLABORATIVE>	Writing instructors (in this program and programs like it) should refrain from evaluating students' early drafts; they should behave as fellow writers and readers, collaborating with students in the problem-solving process.
{CONVINCE}	The president attempts to convince the electorate in his speech (cf. {DECEPTIVE}).
<CRITERIA>	Students in writing courses are evaluated according to criteria set by the instructor.
{DECEPTIVE}	The president uses deceptive language in his speech (cf. {CONVINCE}).
<DISCLOSE>	Writing instructors should tell their students what to write and how that writing will be evaluated.
<FREEDOM>	The academic community affords freedom of expression to its members.
<LIBERAL>	X. is a person whose professed political stance is liberal.
<PERFORM>	Writing students should perform according to criteria instructors set.
{PROMISES}	Politicians may make campaign promises they cannot keep, and therefore might appear to be deceiving the electorate when they break them.

D. Speech Acts (from Cooper, 1984, p. 115)

CONSTATIVES: Expressions of belief together with expressions of intention that the audience form (or continue to hold) a like belief. In the particular descriptions below, belief and intention are considered to be tacit in the expression.

[CONSTATIVE/ASCRIBE]	You *ascribe* if you express that a feature applies to someone or something.
[CONSTATIVE/ASSERT]	You *assert* if you express a proposition.
[CONSTATIVE/CONCEDE]	You *concede* if you express a proposition contrary to what you would like to or previously did believe.
[CONSTATIVE/INFORM]	You *inform* if you express a proposition that your audience does not yet believe.

DIRECTIVES: Expressions of an attitude toward some prospective action by the audience together with an intention that the attitude be taken as a reason to act.

[DIRECTIVE/ASK]	You *ask* if you express that you desire to know whether or not a proposition is true.
[DIRECTIVE/REQUEST]	You *request* if you express that you desire your audience to act.

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